



February 23, 2023, Public Hearing Testimony before the Connecticut Appropriations Committee, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee

H.B. No. 6659, "An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor."

Dear Chairwoman Osten, Chairwoman Walker, Senator McCrory, Representative Felipe, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony to the Committee in support of investing in co-cost school meals for all Connecticut students. This measure promotes the academic success of Connecticut's students and provides tangible, financial relief to Connecticut families.

A hallmark program of the United Ways in Connecticut is ALICE, that stands for **Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. ALICE is a data-driven approach to provide reliable and realistic information on the cost of living specific to regions in Connecticut. You can search our ALICE website, alice.ctunitedway.org, to find the percentage of ALICE households in your district. **Statewide, nearly 40% of households were living at or below the ALICE survival threshold before the pandemic** (Figure 1). ALICE lives in every city and town in Connecticut. More than 85% of Connecticut municipalities have at least 1 in 5 households who are ALICE – ALICE lives urban, suburban, and rural Connecticut (Figure 2). On issues like food insecurity, the needs of ALICE families can be invisible.**

The ALICE data help us understand how critical no-cost school meals are to Connecticut children and families. The research conducted with our partners, United For ALICE and Rutgers University, establishes an ALICE Survival budget that provides a conservative estimate of the cost of household essentials – the bare-bones cost to live and work in the modern economy (Figure 3). Senate Bill 929 responds to the economic reality of Connecticut families: ***a family of four in Connecticut – two adults with an infant and a preschooler – needs to earn over \$90,660 annually to meet the ALICE Survival Budget***. Adjusted for inflation, the annual ALICE Survival Budget is over \$110,000. Households who don't earn enough to afford the essentials – who are below the ALICE Threshold – live pay-check-to-paycheck and, despite working hard, are often falling behind.

Our ALICE family of four will stop qualifying for reduced, not free, school lunch for their children when their annual income exceeds \$51,338. These are federal standards, not adjusted for regional costs, and they do not align with the real costs that Connecticut families are facing. The need is real. In fall of 2021, 41% of Connecticut ALICE households with children experienced food insecurity. ***School meals are a critical support for ALICE families, more than half of whom earn too much to qualify for food supports, like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits*** (Figure 3).

The lifelong negative and costly impacts on childhood food insecurity have been well-documented. Fortunately, it has been demonstrated that free school meals are an excellent response: they are



proven to lower the risk of obesity, improve academic performance, and reduce absenteeism. **No-cost school meals are the “force multiplier” our families and communities need right now.** Families struggling to manage the high rates of inflation on essential household items are provided critical financial and mental relief, school districts save time and money, and all communities benefit from healthier, more engaged students.

We don’t question providing children transportation to school, or tools like Chromebooks to complete schoolwork in-class or at home. These things are the essential ingredients of a modern education. **It is time to acknowledge that school meals are also an essential ingredient to education,** just like our neighboring states of Maine, Massachusetts, New York, and Vermont that have acted on no-cost school meals.

The state of Connecticut will provide tangible relief by providing meals to children: relief from the high rates of inflation on essential household items, from financial and mental stress on children and families, and from the burden on districts to implement the unwieldy, federal income-restricted free/reduced price lunch program. No-cost meals are particularly important for families and children of color in Connecticut, who are disproportionately ALICE: 57% of Black households and 63% of Hispanic Households in Connecticut lived below the ALICE Threshold *before* the pandemic. **No-cost meals provides Connecticut the opportunity to leverage the efficient and effective existing infrastructure in schools across the state to advance education, bolster families’ financial stability, and actively work to reduce economic and racial/ethnic disparities.**

The ALICE data make the case that the need for no-cost meals is wide-spread in Connecticut, particularly for the often “invisible but hungry” children in families who earn too much to qualify for assistance but too little to afford the rising costs of household essentials. Not all children will go hungry without no-cost school meals, but all who opt-in will benefit from nutritious food and the documented positive academic and health outcomes. **Some of the wealthiest towns in Connecticut will not benefit from Raised Bill 929, including towns, like Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, Weston, and Westport, who have opted-out of the National School Lunch Program, a criterion for participation** (Figure 5). Providing no-cost school meals to Connecticut families should not be hindered by concerns of feeding those who are perceived to not need assistance.

We all benefit from healthier, more engaged students. It’s a simple action with big results. Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Respectfully,

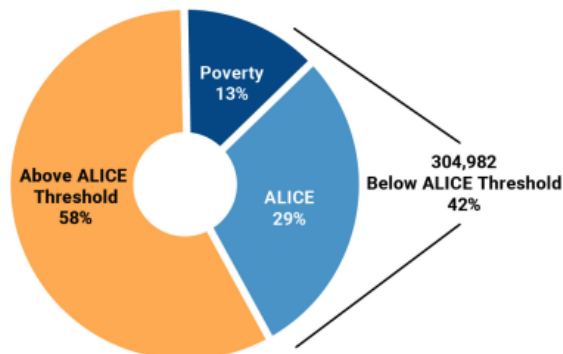
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Casavina Hall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Amy Casavina Hall
Senior Vice President, Strategic Partnerships, Development &. Communications
United Way of Connecticut

Figure 1: Children in ALICE Households in Connecticut Below the ALICE Threshold

Children by Household, Connecticut, 2019

Number of Children in Connecticut = 725,789

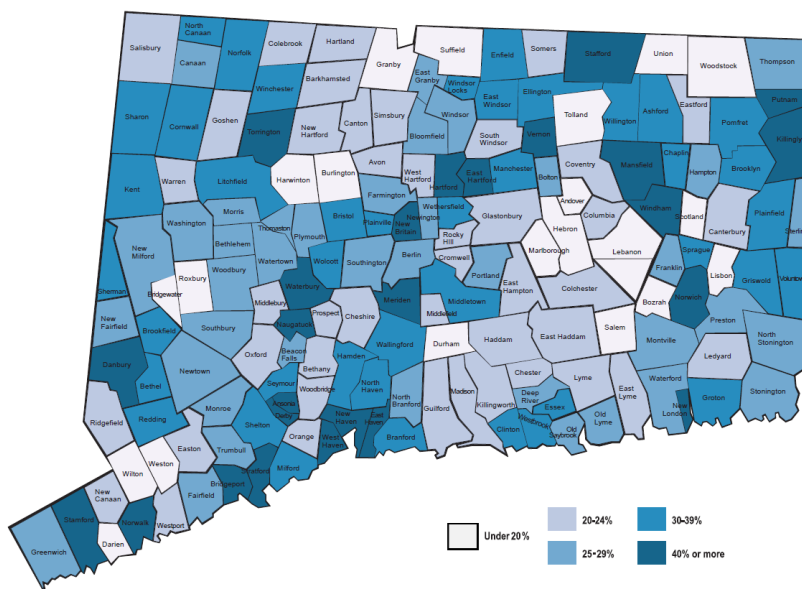


Note: This research uses the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) and focuses on children, whose ALICE status is determined by their household's income compared to local cost of living. The data does not include children who are unhoused or living in group quarters. In this brief, percentages are rounded to whole numbers for ease of reading, which may result in percentages totaling 99% or 101%. All numbers are presented in the [ALICE Children Data Dashboard](#).

Sources: ALICE Threshold, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, PUMS, 2019

Using the U.S. Census Bureau's Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMs), United For ALICE was able to identify children, including by race/ethnicity and family composition, living in Connecticut in households below the ALICE Threshold. 38% of Connecticut households were ALICE in 2018 and 42% of Connecticut children were ALICE in 2019.

Figure 2: Percentage of ALICE Households in Connecticut Municipalities: Connecticut ALICE Report 2020 (2018 data)



In 148 of Connecticut's 169 towns and cities, at least 1 in 5 households live below the ALICE threshold. View a searchable map at alice.ctunitedway.org.

Figure 3: Connecticut Statewide ALICE Survival Budget

2020 ALICE Survival Budget		
	Two Adults, 1 Infant, 1 Preschooler (2018 Data)	Family's Expenses in 2022*
Housing	\$1,310	\$1,549
Child Care	\$1,857	\$2,498
Food	\$936	\$1,108
Transportation	\$826	\$977
Health Care	\$742	\$878
Technology	\$75	\$89
Miscellaneous	\$687	\$813
Taxes	\$1,122	\$1,327
Monthly Total	\$7,555	\$9,239
Annual Total	\$90,660	\$110,868
Hourly Wage	\$45.33	\$55.43

*Based on the US Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator;
adjusted child care expense calculated using CT Office of Early
Childhood, 2022 Early Care and Education Market Rate Survey

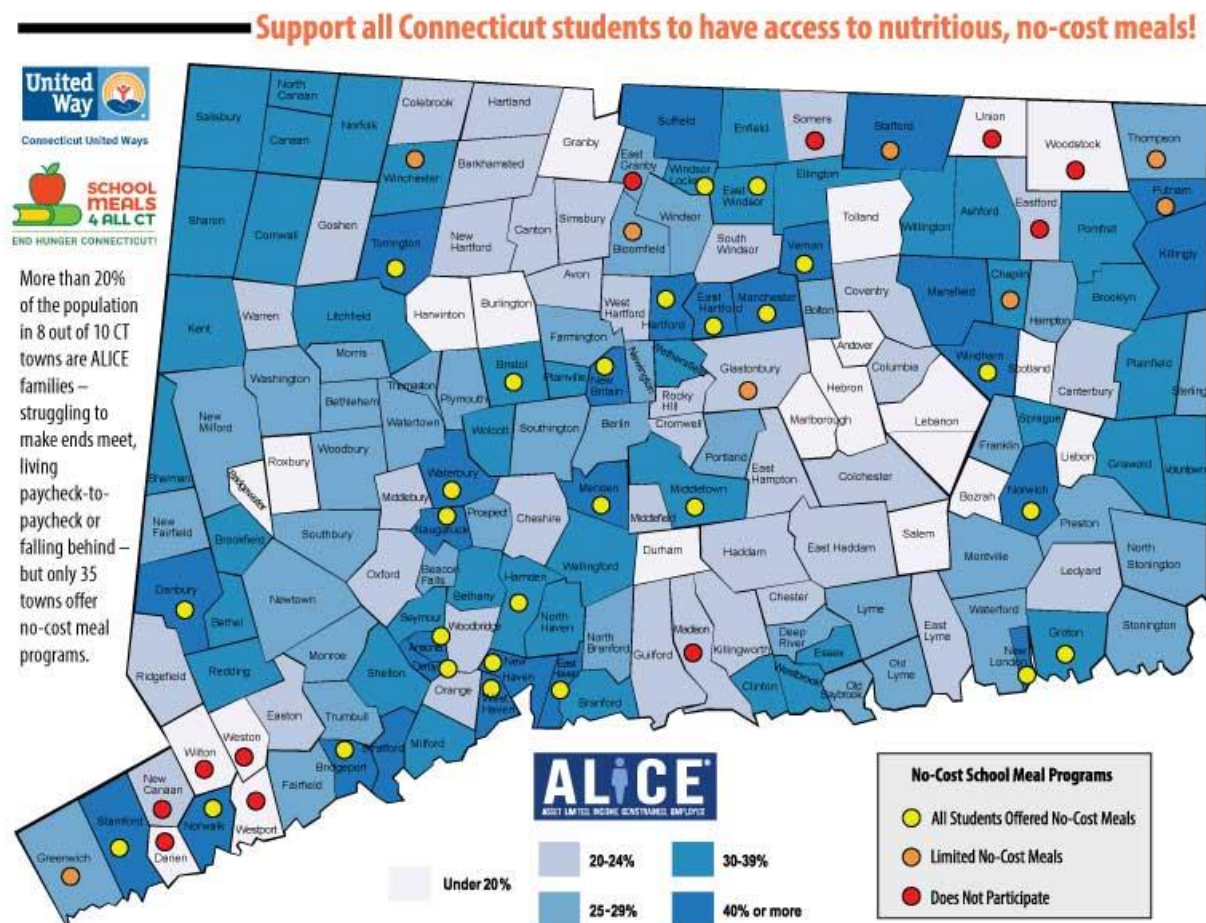
The ALICE Survival budget includes household essentials – housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and technology, plus taxes and a 10% contingency (miscellaneous expenses). ALICE Survival Budgets by Connecticut regions are available at alice.ctunitedway.org.

Figure 4: The ALICE Food Gap: ALICE Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Utilization in Connecticut

	Connecticut Children in ALICE Households Enrolled in SNAP	Connecticut Children in ALICE Households Not Enrolled in SNAP
SNAP Utilization Percent	37%	63%
SNAP Utilization Number	112,459	192,523

Nearly 200,000 Connecticut Children in ALICE households are left in a food assistance gap. 63% of ALICE children are not enrolled in SNAP. As recently as the fall of 2021, 41% of Connecticut families below the ALICE Threshold with children reported that sometimes or often “children were not eating enough because we just couldn’t afford enough food.” While this was less common in higher-income households, 17% of respondents above the Threshold also struggled to afford food for their children. Data source: United For ALICE, analysis of US Census data, 2022

Figure 5: Map of Municipalities by ALICE Population and Universal School Meal Programs



The eleven towns with red circles in do not participate in the National School Lunch Program; they would not benefit from additional state investment.